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NOTES ON ALLITERATION IN THE POETIC EDDA

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The Berlin Anglicist and linguist Martin LEHNERT (1955: 33) says that there are some 30,000 alliterative lines in Old English, 7,300 Eddic long lines, 6,000 and 335 in Old Saxon (Heliand and Genesis) and 200 in Old High German (Hildebrandslied, Muspilli etc.). The following contains some notes on alliteration in the Poetic Edda. The three main types of alliteration ([a] for alliterating, [x] for not alliterating) are [aa/ax] [ax/ax] and [xa/ax]. There are, however, a number of cases where the principal stave (Hauptstab, höfuðstafr, Snorri Sturluson, c.1220, quoted from A. HEUSLER 1918–1919, §35) is not in the normal place. Moreover, there are also several lines where no alliteration is available, and where, although I am not a medieval Icelandic poet, I would compose the line to make it more alliterative. Toward the end of the article is given a select list of 50 alphabetically arranged alliterations from the Poetic Edda.

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1. There are three main types of alliteration (abbreviated [a], non alliterating [x]) in a long line of the Poetic Edda, as in other Germanic languages. The first stressed word of the second half-line (second hemistich) decides the alliterating consonant or vowel, which is called principal stave (Hauptstab, höfuðstafr, Heusler §35).

- (1) [aa/ax] **sól varp sunnan, / sinni mána** (Vsp.5) the sun, the companion of the moon, threw (her rays) from south.
- (2) [ax/ax] **unz þrjár kvómo, / þursa meyjar** (Vsp.8) until three girls of giants came.
- (3) [xa/ax] **ek sá Baldri, / blóðgom tívur** (Vsp.31) I saw for Baldr, for the bloody god.

Vowels can alliterate with any vowel, as in other Germanic languages, on assumption that a glottal stop preceded an initial vowel (word or syllable), as it is still seen in modern German *ʔauf ʔeiner ʔalten ʔEiche* (on an old oak).

- (4) [aa/ax] **ek man iǫtna, / ár um borna** (Vsp.2) I remember the giants who were born long ago.
- (5) [ax/ax] **alda þǫrnom, / ørløg seggia** (Vsp.20) for the children of men, the fate of men (acc.).
- (6) [xa/ax] **hittoz æsir / á Iðavelli** (Vsp.7) the gods met on Idavoll Plain.

Consonant clusters *sk*, *sp*, *st* can alliterate only with *sk*, *sp*, *st*.

- (7) [aa/ax] **skeggöld, skálmöld**, / **skildir ro klofnir** (Vsp.45) axe-age, sword-age, shields are split asunder. [ro=ero]
 (8) [ax/ax] **spakr þætti mér** / **spillir bauga** (Fm.32) the breaker (and bestower) of rings (prince) would seem wise to me.
 (9) [xa/ax] **mér hefir stillir** / **stefnt til eyrar** (HHv.33) the prince has challenged me to an island duel.

Types like [aa/xa] (the key word, the first stressed syllable of the second half-line, does not alliterate with any of the other three) can be allowed (Heusler §36).

- (10) [aa/xa] **brœðr bergrisa**, / **þeim erom bornar** (Gr.9) mountain-giants' brothers, we are descended from them.
 (11) [ax/xa] **heima letia** / **ek mynda Heriaföðr** (Vm.2) I would keep the Father of armies at home. If one reads ¹Heria | föðr, then the type is [ax/ax].
 (12) [xa/xa] **segðu mér ór helio** / **ek man ór heimi** (Bdr.6) tell me the news from the hell, I know the news from the world.

Parallel alliterations of the type [ab/ab] or crossed alliterations [ab/ba] are also found:

- (13) [ab/ab] **ef ek minn hamar** / **mættak hitta** (Þrk.3) if I could find my hammer.
 (14) [ab/ba] **sendi Atli** / **áro sína** (Od.25) Atli sent his messengers.

The following (15) is an example of [aa/aa].

- (15) [aa/aa] **sumir úlf sviðo**, / **sumir orm sniðo** (Br.4) some roasted wolf, some cut serpent into pieces. If one contrasts **úlf** (wolf) and **orm** (serpent) and stresses these words (no stress on **sumir**), then the type is [ab/ab].

2. There are a number of irregularities or exceptions. Occasionally initial *h* is disregarded in ON and OE (Heusler §27).

- (16) **þogðo allir**, / **hugðo at ráðom** (Sg.50) 'all were silent, they considered what to say' (*h* in **hugðo** is ignored). In cases like
 (17) **Ask veit ek standa**, / **heitir Yggdrasil** (Vsp.19, I know that an ash-tree stands called Yggdrasil), the last word should be read ¹Ygg | drasil (then the alliteration pattern is [ax/ax]). The same is with
 (18) **ofrgiöld fá** / **gumna synir** (Rm.4, the sons of men get a terrible requital), where the alliteration pattern is [xa/ax]. In
 (19) **þá var hvívetna** / **vilmál talið** (Br.12, then pleasant words in everything were spoken), if one pronounces ¹hví | vetna (in everything, dat.), then it can alliterate with **vilmál** (pleasant words).

No alliteration is available in the following cases.

- (20) **Rístu nú, Skírnir**, / **ok gakk at beiða** (Sk.1, Get up now, Skirmir, and go to ask);
 (21) **veiztattu fyrir gorla** (Hrbl.4, you don't know clearly what is before you; shorter line of the song form);
 (22) **Svaf vætr Freyia** / **átta nóttom** (Þrk.28, Freyia did not sleep for eight nights). Instead of **svaf vætr**, **svaf ekki** (slept not) could make the line alliterating with **átta**. (Heusler §27.3. admits [vætr : átta] because of half vocalic pronunciation of *v*).

- (23) **Reiðr varð Gunnarr / ok hnipnaði** (Sg.13, Gunnar got angry and cast down);
- (24) **Ek mun bjóða þér / fagarar veigar** (Hunn.11, I will give you beautiful drinks). Instead of **ek mun bjóða**, *ek mun fá* could make the line alliterating with **fagarar** (fá e-m e-s ‘provide something for some one’). Similar example of *v* and initial vowel is
- (25) **ero í varúðom / Iónakrs sonom** (Sg.63, as for Ionakr sons, they are in careful attention). In
- (26) **varan bið ek þik vera, / ok eigi ofvaran** (Háv.131, I ask you to be cautious, but not overcautious), either [¹varan : ¹ofvaran] or [¹varan : ¹of¹varan]. In
- (27) **Vesall maðr / ok illa skapi** (Háv.22, a wretched man and of evil character) [vesall : illa] is admitted, but couldn’t one use *illr maðr* (a bad man) instead of **vesall maðr**?
- (28) **þat er bazt / at han þegi** (Háv.101, it is best that he keeps silent) does not have any alliteration, unless one stresses the pronoun *þat* (it), which is quite unlikely. If I were a skald, I would say **þat þykkir** (or *þikkir, þikki*) **bazt, at hann þegi** (it seems best that he keeps silent), where *þat* is too weak to admit the line as alliterating with *þegi* (he keep silent, subjunctive). In
- (29) **þá hefir hann bazt, / ef hann þegir** (Háv.80, then it is best for him if he keeps silent), if one could say *þá hefir þegn* (man, warrior) **bazt**, it could alliterate with *þegir*. In
- (30) **armar lýsto, / enn af þaðan** (Skm.6, her arms shone, and from there [all the sky and sea shone]), should one stress the adverb ¹af (from)?

Pronouns, otherwise unstressed as function words, might be contextually stressed as in

- (31) **Hné við bólstri / hon á annan veg** (Sg.48, she fell against the pillow, she backwards) is *hon* stressed here?
- (32) **hon mun þér unna, / sem ek skyldak** (Sg.58, she’ll love you as I ought to have done, with stressed *ek*).

In ljóðaháttur (song form) the stanza consists of two long lines with caesura, alternating with two lines containing three stresses and no caesura.

- (33) **Bú er betra, / þótt lítit sé** (Háv.36, 37, A farm of your own is better, even if small) has no alliteration available connecting the first and the second half-lines. Instead of **bú** (farm) couldn’t one use *lendur* (land, estate, Ländereien, praedia, Möbius) alliterating with the adjective fem.pl.*lítlar*?

3. In the Poetic Edda there are not many alliterating set phrases like *slow and steady* or *Land und Leute*. One finds better examples in Old Norse proverbs (NYGAARD), as for example, *Af hreinu bergi kemr hreint vatn* (from a clean mountain comes clean water), *Eigi fellr tré við fyrsta hogg* (no one fells a tree with the first stroke), *Fyrsti fugl fær fyrsta korn* (the first bird gets the first grain), *Lík börn leika bezt* (like children play best), *Opt kemr skin eptir skúr* (sunshine often comes after a shower), *Ván er vakandi manns draumr* (hope is the dream of a man who is awake), down to modern times, as in Danish *Få er som far, ingen som mor* (a few are like father, no one is like mother), *Gode ord er bedre end guld* (good words are better than gold). Odin has many names like *Al-föðr* (father of all) and *Alda-föðr* (father of men), which can alliterate with Odin, but there is not a line where the two words stand together.

4. Eight best things are named in Grm.44. Grm.[=Grimnir ‘the Masked One’] is Odin.

Askr Yggdrasils, hann er æztr viðá,	The ash of Yggdrasil is the noblest of trees,
enn Skíðblaðnir skipa,	and Skidbladnir the best of ships,
Óðinn ása, enn íóa Sleipnir,	Odin is the best of gods, Sleipnir of horses,
Bilrøst brúa, enn Bragi skálda,	Bilrost is best of bridges, Bragi of poets,
Hábrók hauka, enn hunda Garmr.	Habrok is best of hawks, and Garm of dogs.

When is the best thing tried? Hávamál 81 tells when it is tried.

At kveldi skal dag leyfa, kono, er brend er,	At evening the day should be praised,
	the woman when she is burned (is dead),
mæki, er reyndr er, mey, er gefin er,	the sword when it is tested,
	the girl when she is married,
ís, er yfir kóm, ǫl, er drukkit er.	the ice when one goes over it,
	beer when it is drunk.

5. Below is given a select list of fifty examples of alliteration in the Poetic Edda (alphabetically arranged).

1. **alsnotra ambót** (Prk.26) the very shrewd maid [=Loki]
2. **Ask...heitir Yggdrasill** (Vsp.19) an ash-tree called Yggdrasil [=the world tree]
3. **Ask ok Emblo, ørløglausa** (Vsp.17) Ask and Embla [=the first man and woman], [still] fateless (acc.)
4. **bar hana bióri** (Vkv.28) [he] overcame her with beer.
5. **biørg brotnoðo** (Prk.21) the mountains split asunder.
6. **biørsalr...Brimir** (Vsp.37) beer hall of Giant Brimir.
7. **bregða blunnstøfom** (Sd.2) [I could not] break the slumber-spells.
8. **Brynhildr...brúðr** (Grp.45) Brynhild the bride.
9. **deyr fé, deyia frændr** (Háv.77) cattle die, kinsmen die.
10. **dimmi dreki** (Vsp.66) the dark dragon.
11. **dreymði dróttláta** (Am.10) the courtly lady had a dream (fem.acc.)
12. **drukko ok dømdo døegr** mart (Sg.2) [they] drank and talked for many days.
13. **drykk ins dýra miaðar** (Háv.105, 140) a drink of the precious mead.
14. **dverga dróttin** (Vsp.9) the king of the dwarfs (acc.)
15. **alla forsar** (Vsp.59) waterfalls fall.
16. **fen fiøturs** (Vkv.24) mud of fetters.
17. **fiall farið...**(Háv.3) [he] has come over the mountain.
18. **freista frama** (Háv.2) seek one’s luck.
19. **Frigg ok Freyia ok fleiri** goð (Od.9) Frigg and Freyia and more gods.
20. **gap ginnunga...gras** (Vsp.3) yawning gap [and] grass [nowhere].
21. **Glaðsheimr...gullbiarta** (Grm.7) Gladshheim...the gold-bright [Valhalla stands]
22. **grét Guðrún, Giúka dóttir** (Gðr.I.16) Gudrun wept, Giuki’s daughter.
23. **gull á Gnitaheði** (Akv.6) gold on Gnita-heath [=home of the dragon Fafnir]
24. **Gunnari Gotna drótti** (Grp.35) for Gunnar, king of the Goths.
25. **hálfom hleif** (Háv.52) [even] with half a loaf [one can get a friend]

26. **harðan Hunding** (HH.10) Hunding the hard (acc.) [=the enemy of Volsung]
27. **harðast harma minna** (Ghv.16) the cruellest of my griefs.
28. **Hel hafi!** (Fm.21) Hel [Goddess of Death] take you! [Russians say Devil take you!]
29. **hiarðar heim skolo** (Háv.21) cattle should go home [they know the time when].
30. **hló þá Atla hugr** (Gðr.III.10) then Atli's heart laughed.
31. **í holt Hoddmimis** (Vm.45) [the first man and woman in the new world will hide] in Hoddmimir's wood.
32. **krásir...konor** (Þrk.24) the dainties [are] for the women.
33. **kunningri kono** (Vkv.25) to the cunning queen.
34. **lopt ok loðgr** (Skm.6) [all] sky and sea [shone]
35. **lundr lognfara** (Skm.41) quiet grove [where Frey and his lady Gerd are to meet]
36. **loðgr ero lýða læ** (Sd.2) long are the woes of the people.
37. **maðr mæztr** (Grp.7) the most glorious man.
38. **mey ok moð** vaxa saman (Vm.33) a girl and a boy (acc.) grow together.
39. **miðgarð mæran** (Vsp.4) the great Midgard (acc.the world of mankind)
40. **ofdrykkia oðs** (Háv.11) too much beer drinking.
41. **ósánir akrar...** (Vsp.62) unsown fields [will grow in the new world]
42. **Reginn...ræðr** (Fm.33) Regin will betray.
43. **sól tér sortna, sígr...** (Vsp.57) the sun blackens, [the earth] sinks [into the sea]
44. **stund er til stokksins, qnnor til steinsins** (Hrbl.56) one hour to the stock, another to the stone, cf. *G. über Stock und Stein*, KHM 57)
45. **Svanhildr, sólar geisla** (Sg.55) Svanhild, [brighter] than the sunshine.
46. **vá Valhallar...vitoð...** (Vsp.33) woe of Valhalla, do ye know?
47. **vápn dauða vera** (Grm.8) those fallen in the battle (acc.).
48. **vargr á viðom** (HH.II.33) wolf in the forest.
49. **vindöld, vargöld...veröld...** (Vsp.45) wind-age, wolf-age, [before] the world [ruins]
50. **oð með moðnom, enn með ásom biórr** (Alv.34) [it is called] ale among men, and beer among gods [men's language and gods' language were different].

ABBREVIATIONS OF THE POEMS OF THE ELDER EDDA

Akv. = Atlakviða in grœnlenska (The Lay of Atli); Alv. = Alvissmál (All-Wise's Sayings); Am. = Atlamál in grœnlensko (The Greenlandic Poem of Atli); Bdr. = Baldrs draumar (Bardr's Dreams); Br. = Brot af Sigurðarkviðu (Fragment of a Poem about Sigurd); Fm. = Fáfnismál (The Lay of Fafnir); Gðr.I. = Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta (The First Lay of Gudrun); Gðr.III. = Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja (The Third Lay of Gudrun); Ghv. = Guðrúnarhvöt (The Whetting of Gudrun); Grm. = Grímnismál (Grimnir's Sayings); Grp. = Grípisspá (Gripir's Prophecy); Grt. = Grottasöngur (The Song of Grotti); Háv. = Hávamál (Sayings of the High One); HH. = Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri (The First Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani); HHv. = Helgakviða Hiorvarðzsonar (The Poem of Helgi Hiorvardsson); HH.II. = Helgakviða Hundingsbana qnnor (A Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani); Hrbl. = Hábarðzlióð (Harvard's Song); Hunn. = Hunnenschlachtlied (The Lay of the Fight of the Huns); Od. = Oddrúnargrátr (Oddrun's Lament); Rm. = Reginsmál (The Lay of Regin); Sd. = Sigdrífomál (The Lay of Sigdrífa); Sg. = Sigurðarkviða in skamma (A Short Poem about Sigurd); Skm. = For Skirnir (Skirnir's Journey); Vkv. = Völundarkviða (The Lay of Volund); Vm. = Vafðrúðnismál (Vafthrudnir's Sayings); Vsp. = Völuspá (The Seeress's Prophecy); Þrk. = Þrymskviða (Thrym's Poem)

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